

Book Side Peter Brown
Dead Elvis
A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession
by Greil Marcus
Doubleday \$25
reviewed by Peter Brown

This is a often gripping, sometime fascinating and sometimes tedious account of public obsession of the dead King of rock 'n' roll. Extensively researched, it includes everything from personal sex ads of Elvis impersonators to obscure songs, books and scenarios as well as stories of Elvis fanatics. Some of it is grotesque parody -- the chapter on Presleyburgers (there were also Deanburgers) -- and some of it is insanely outrageous like the woman who claimed to become impregnated by touching an Elvis record.

Marcus does a good job of tying it all together, but gets into trouble when he insists on attaching significance to things which don't deserve it. He seems unable to let a joke be a joke or satire simply be satire. In Marcus' vision it becomes a revolutionary act of the utmost importance worthy of comparison to the philosopher, politician, artist or historical figure of your choice. Under such heavy duty analysis, the joke becomes lost in the process.

Much of the book is reprints of earlier Marcus reviews and articles of Presley albums, books on Presley and essays on what Presley and his death meant to him. When writing directly about Presley, Marcus is at his most passionate and keeps you reading. But again, his need intellectualize and perhaps justify his reverence leads him to improbably
(more)

2 Side Brown
conclusions and unlikely assumptions. He can't believe or accept that Elvis' recording of "That's All Right Mama" was a spontaneous moment of musical magic (which by all accounts it was). For Marcus, it was a well-planned, thought-out act of rebellion. Such assumptions leave one to wonder if he understands music at all.

Marcus is more on-target in his scathing indictment of Albert Goldman's horrendous biography Elvis. He brilliantly exposes not only Goldman's mean-spiritedness, but the false portrayals not only of Elvis but of Sun Records founder Sam Phillips a brilliant man who also was wrongly portrayed as a buffoon in the Jerry Lee Lewis bio film, Great Balls of Fire.

Some of the book's best parts don't have anything to do with its premise, but with the history of rock 'n' roll both from a factual and satiric viewpoint. Among the satires are the parody film scenario Jungle Music, first published in Creem magazine which is an absolute riot, while Joseph C. Smith's The Day the Music Died is a fascinating fictional, but based-on-fact account of the music business side of rock 'n' roll through the eyes of a screwed over musician, while on the factual side, songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller's account of living in a Marxist commune in L.A., and what happened when their song, "Hound Dog" became a hit is both interesting and amusing.

Dead Elvis is best read in parts. Jim Jarmusch's movie Mystery Train (which is mentioned in the book) captures much more concisely what this book is trying to say in the hotel room scenes where the cheesy Elvis portraits watch the action while a late-night disc-jockey plays Elvis singing "Blue Moon."

(more)

3 Side Brown

The irony is that in gathering these sometimes humorous, often sick scraps of mostly useless information, which definitely says something about this society's weirdness, the book becomes a part of the very thing it's trying to document.